

29 November 2020

The Prophet like Moses Deuteronomy 18:9-19

The book of Deuteronomy, which presents itself as a series of speeches given by Moses to the Hebrews before the conquest of Canaan, was probably written centuries after that time by a faithful Hebrew seeking to reclaim the teachings of Moses for a later generation. We read Deuteronomy 18, verses 9-19:

⁹When you come into the land that the Lord your God is giving you, you must not learn to imitate the abhorrent practices of those nations. ¹⁰No one shall be found among you who makes a son or daughter pass through fire, or who practices divination, or is a soothsayer, or an augur, or a sorcerer, ¹¹or one who casts spells, or who consults ghosts or spirits, or who seeks oracles from the dead. ¹²For whoever does these things is abhorrent to the Lord; it is because of such abhorrent practices that the Lord your God is driving them out before you. ¹³You must remain completely loyal to the Lord your God. ¹⁴Although these nations that you are about to dispossess do give heed to soothsayers and diviners, as for you, the Lord your God does not permit you to do so.

¹⁵The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet. ¹⁶This is what you requested of the Lord your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly when you said: ‘If I hear the voice of the Lord my God any more, or ever again see this great fire, I will die.’ ¹⁷Then the Lord replied to me: ‘They are right in what they have said. ¹⁸I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their own people; I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet, who shall speak to them everything that I command. ¹⁹Anyone who does not heed the words that the prophet shall speak in my name, I myself will hold accountable.

Today is the first Sunday of the church year, the first Sunday of Advent – the season in which we prepare ourselves for Christ’s coming at Christmas. During this time we sing songs about looking for the Messiah – “Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus” and the like – and we preachers often preach from the various prophecies in the Old Testament that the church has understood as foretellings of the Christ. I’m going to be doing that this Advent, too, but here’s a curious thing about those prophecies. Each one imagines a very different sort of deliverer and a very different kind of salvation, to the extent that it’s kind of hard to reconcile them to each other or to apply them all to the same person. So over the next four weeks, we’ll be looking at some of the lesser-known visions of the Coming One, thinking them through, and then looking at how (and whether) Christ fulfills that vision. Then we’ll ask, “What sort of deliverer do we dream of?”

Today’s passage from Deuteronomy 18 is not one of the scriptures that we traditionally think of as a “Messianic prophecy,” but for all that, it was one of the most important passages in the Messianic imagination of 1st century Jews. The promise of “a Prophet like Moses” was so widely longed for that the concept was often abbreviated to just “the Prophet,” and in the gospels we see people wondering about Jesus, “This isn’t the Prophet, is it?” So let’s look at this pre-Advent hope for a prophet like Moses: What did it mean for the original writer and audience? Well, Moses was many things but was, above all, the great lawgiver. He was the one who brought God’s laws down from Mount Sinai and, through them, established the covenant between the Lord and Israel, where God said, “I will be your God; you shall be my people.”

This is clearly what the author of the book of Deuteronomy is thinking of. The book of Deuteronomy shows up fairly late in Israel's history. This, apparently, is the book that was found in the temple during the renovations of King Josiah, and it became the guidebook for Josiah's reforms, when the king and the chief priest sought to restore the legacy of Moses. Read in that context, the passage comes through clear as a bell. "Do not follow the practices of the nations around you, and especially do not turn to their methods of fortune-telling, soothsaying, and divination. Do not call up the dead or practice any such things. As God has spoken to you directly through Moses, God will raise up another prophet like Moses who will speak directly from God, and *that* prophet you shall listen to." The author of Deuteronomy seems to imagine the coming deliverer as one who would restore the Torah and turn the people to obedience to the law, just like Moses. And so it was that one Messianic figure that many looked for in 1st century Palestine was the new Moses, one who would restore the true faith of Israel and call people back to obedience so that once again God could proclaim, "I am your God, and you are my People." So, did Jesus fulfill this expectation?

Well, yes. Sort of. In a way. But not in the way anyone really expected. He does say clearly in Matthew 5, "I have not come to abolish the law, but to fulfill it," which works perfectly with this hope. But then Jesus starts explaining what he means by "fulfill." You have heard the law, "Don't commit murder." I say don't even imagine it. Don't even be angry. Instead, forgive. You've heard the law, "Don't commit adultery." I say don't even imagine it. Put lust away. You've heard the law, "Don't take a false vow." I say don't make vows at all. Just speak the truth all the time. You've heard "Love your neighbor." I say, yes do that – and also your enemy. Just love. So, that's a *kind* of fulfillment of the law, in the sense that it takes the law and expands on it, but, um, it's also way harder.

In other ways, Jesus' "fulfillment" sounds more like sorting out priorities in the law. The law of Moses spent a lot of time on things like what foods were clean and unclean, and what people were clean and unclean, and how an unclean person could go about being made clean, and Jesus says, "Yeah, I'm not so concerned about that. The stuff you touch doesn't defile you; wash it off. The stuff you eat is just passing through. I'm concerned about the stuff that starts from the inside – the anger and resentment and envy and pride – that's what that defiles you. Work on that instead." Later, Jesus says, "You know it's good to keep the law of Moses, but the laws aren't all equivalent. Stop worrying about the little stuff, like tithing your mint plants, and start worrying about the 'weightier matters' of the law, like justice and mercy." Or again, the law established the ways that the Jews were to be a separate, holy people, distinct from the Gentiles, but Jesus ignored that stuff too. He visited, ate with, fed, and healed Gentiles and unclean people, just as he did with Jews. Remember the feeding of the 5000? That was in Jewish land, so those were 5000 Jews, and when Jesus did it, the people whispered to each other, "Did you see that? We were hungry in the desert, and he produced food from nowhere! Who does that remind you of? Is this the Prophet like Moses?" But then, a little later, Jesus crossed the sea into Gentile territory and fed 4000 unclean Gentiles in the same way. So, not *exactly* like Moses.

So, yes. Jesus does, in a way, fulfill Deuteronomy's vision. He is a new Moses. But not really in the way that that author imagined. Jesus went both deeper and broader. Moses gave laws to obey; Jesus went beneath behavior to the confused human heart and called for change within. Moses established limits, marking off the actions (and people) that were to be considered out of bounds; Jesus recognized no limits, breaking through boundaries, shaking up old assumptions, and reaching out to those who had once been considered unclean.

What about today and our waiting for the Christ? Well, there are still some who long for the sort of figure imagined in Deuteronomy, someone to come and restore morality and faithfulness to God's laws. Most often I hear these people talking about returning to "biblical morality" and clinging to a "biblical worldview." I'm usually a little suspicious of those expressions, though, because it seems to me that people are pretty selective in their reading of the Bible's morality. Generally, people use "biblical morality" as a code for "the way things used to be before they got all confusing." And when the biblical worldview people describe what that consists of, they trot out selectively culled biblical laws and instructions that describe the worldview of the 1950s American church. Thus they lift up verses that reject homosexuality, affirm traditional gender roles, condemn swearing and indecency (especially on television and the radio), approve of short hair for men and long hair for women, and for good measure they note the verses in Leviticus that prohibit tattoos. You know, the way things used to be, when you knew who you were: a man was a man and a woman was a woman and you didn't have to worry about which pronouns you were supposed to use. Today, everything's all mixed up. We need a savior to come back and put all the pieces back in the right place.

I get that. I do. I mean, if anyone should understand that, I should. I'm a straight white male wage-earner who wears a necktie to work, who doesn't swear (on the air), who has short hair, and no tattoos (that you're aware of). I would have rocked it in the 1950s. I even wear hats. So, yeah, I can imagine why people who fit that narrow mold like I do might long for a new law-giver Christ who would restore things to the way they used to be, when things were more comfortable for people like us. But we need to remember that Jesus didn't do that the first time, either. Jesus fulfilled the law by breaking it open and revealing the principles that lie at its heart: justice, compassion, love. Jesus affirmed the law by extending it in new ways and including new people. For Jesus, fulfilling the law was not about returning to a halcyon past but about pushing on to new implications. Where the old law had drawn lines between people, Jesus skipped merrily across the lines and scuffed them out with his toe. To those who dream of a savior who will return things to the good old days, I'm sorry. Jesus didn't do that the first time; I see no reason to think he ever will.

Like the author of Deuteronomy, we are looking for the one who will deliver us. We still wait for the Christ. But we have an advantage over that ancient author in that we've seen what the Christ was like the first time. We don't have to imagine who Christ will be. The old author, understandably enough, imagined the Coming One as the answer to all his own dreams and preferences. We don't get to do that, though. We can't shape the Messiah to fit our specs; we've already seen what the Messiah's like, and it's way better than we could have imagine. Harder, yes. But better, deeper, broader, freer. That's the Christ we wait for.